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HOW POSTMODERNIST POETRY IMAGINES

A Thesis Presented

by

Seunghyun Shin

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts
Specializing in English

May, 2021

Defense Date: February 11, 2021
Thesis Examination Committee:

Todd McGowan, Ph.D., Advisor
John Waldron, Ph.D., Chairperson
Daniel Fogel, Ph.D.
Cynthia J. Forehand, Ph.D., Dean of the Graduate College

Abstract

The central aim of this thesis is to demonstrate that, in establishing themselves as public intellectuals, poets writing since the turn of the twenty-first century have restored the referentiality of language in poetry. Thus, the thesis challenges and complicates postmodernist treatments of language that insist on the infinite regression of meaning, as have, for example, the Language poets. As the Language poets, feminists, queer theorists, and other post-Derridean theorists began to challenge the meaning of language in the last third or so of the twentieth century, they devalued the referential relationship between words and the world. Taking the Kantian sense of productive imagination as a restorative method for the significance of language in poetry, the thesis will contest the postmodernist treatment of language by illustrating that contemporary poets share a vision of poetry as a medium for rejuvenating language and, subsequently, have been performing as public intellectuals in the twenty-first century.

In order to make this argument, the thesis begins with postmodernist poetry's debt to Derridean deconstruction and explains how we can reclaim the referentiality of language in poetry. The poets studied in the body of this thesis—Natasha Trethewey and Raúl Zurita—extend a strong tradition of poetry that refers directly and explicit to socio-economic realities, engaging with a globalized economy, and with culture and politics around the world. Furthermore, the thesis shows how such poets have recuperated rhetoric as central to contemporary poetry.

Acknowledgments

To my advisor, Professor Todd McGowan—the teacher-scholar who has been and will be my role model.

To my mentor, Professor Daniel Fogel—the writer who has been and will be my inspiration.

…

And to my mother—the only person who has been and always will be my lifelong motivation.

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Introduction

What might a thesis entitled “How Postmodernist Poetry Imagines” conceivably be about? A few years ago, after my presentation about the documentary poetics of Muriel Rukeyser in a conference for undergraduate students of the SUNY campuses, I remember one of the professors in the audience asked me “Why do we have to study literature? We obviously have better media than books.” I did not think of the question as a derogatory treatment of literary studies; but being asked to answer such questions reminded me of how literary studies have been publicly underappreciated in the academy. A few weeks after the conference, I was nominated for the presidential award for the undergraduate research, thanks to the support of many professors; I remember my honors thesis advisor and the honors college director had a dispute with the dean, though, about awarding it to a student of English literature. Although I ended up being literally the only student who received the award without any grant funds in that year as a result of that dispute—the director and the dean at that time claimed that the reason was not related to my major at all but the university had been obviously keeping more budget away every year from the department and from humanities majors—what I had felt in the awards ceremony, the bitter taste of taking a picture with the dean who simply did not want to give such awards at all to students whose majors were in the humanities, spurred me to research the value of literary studies today.

Postmodernist writers today find themselves adrift in a world far more complex in words, concepts, and signs than ever before. The supposition that language is transparent or referential is challenged by feminists, and especially, the Language poets, whose explorations of “meaning” shifted the ideal of language from

a referential to a syntactical frame. As postmodernist and poststructuralist regimens—such as deconstruction, New Historicism, and postcolonial theories—dominate contemporary literary theory, I believe it is more difficult for us to distinguish the socio-economic values of literature in a language-centered world. In this thesis, I argue that: (i) imagination allows poetry to be rhetorical, that is, to convey political values against that language-centered literary world; and (ii) contemporary poets in that light beyond the boundaries of different languages and national territories—in the globalized economy, culture, and increasingly politics—take it upon themselves to perform the role of public intellectuals who actively participate in the public discourse of society by considering their poems as a medium to respond to the normative problems and to "rise above the partial preoccupation of one's own profession—and engage with the global issues of truth, judgment, and taste of the time."[1] My schema consists of two parts. In this introduction, I first briefly define the poetry of anti-referentiality as postmodernist treatment of language in poetry and discuss how two senior critics—Charles Altieri and Marjorie Perloff, whose works enlightened me so much—have responded to the issue of reading the poetry of *différance*. Then I consider the ways in which the meaning of language becomes noncategorical in such postmodernist poetries whereas the Kantian treatment of imagination suggests an antithetical dialectical model for us to consider poetry as a politically-progressive medium that establishes communities among the public. To exemplify how the Kantian notion could be embodied in poetry, I will refer to William Carlos Williams' concept of imagination that attempts to challenge the aesthetics of Modernism that has

[1] Furedi, p. 32.

governed the formalist views of the New Critics. After doing so, in the body of the thesis, I refer to two contemporary poets—Natasha Trethewey and Raúl Zurita—whose work reembodies such poetics that create intellectual conversations by positioning the poet as a public intellectual. I try to illuminate their literary accomplishments—Trethewey as a representative of the new age of Black poetry in the twenty-first century that I call the "Black poetry renaissance," in terms of what many writers and critics signaled as the new age of Black poetry, and Zurita as a "postmodern master"—and the subsequent public intellectual manner their works convey.[2] By doing so, I try to reintegrate imagination in postmodernist poetries in the language-centered world by focusing on how the subjective judgments of readers are mingled with imagination that forms communities among readers and by distinguishing the popularity of such poetries beyond the boundaries of American Modernism and English poetry in the contemporary world.

Poetry of *Différance* in Postmodernism

"Postmodernism" is a widely-used term in literature, apparently in association with the broad movement that developed in the mid-twentieth century across the arts, philosophy, and literature that marked a departure from the early twentieth century. In literary studies, the term's definition has vagueness and relativism simultaneously: any piece of literature written after the rise of radical poststructuralists in the 1960s and 70s—such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, and later

[2] The term "Black poetry renaissance" is actually signaled by many writers and critics. Charles Henry Rowell, for example, contextualize this tendency of contemporary Black poetry in *Angles of Ascent* and his ideas throughout *Callaloo*. For a full discussion, see the introduction to *Angles of Ascent*, "Writing Self, Writing Community." On the other hand, the University of California Press describes *Purgatory* as "the fiercely inventive voice of a postmodern master." The full description is available via https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520259737/purgatory.

Fredric Jameson—could potentially be labeled *postmodernist*, but no literature is inherently postmodern if we consider that Modernism has been encapsulated by Ezra Pound's injunction to "Make it new," and in that light modernity may be said to be defined by innovation beyond what precursors had done through the nineteenth century. To amend Karl Marx's dictum, "All that is solid melts into air"[3] modern experience is a process of recognizing that everything can melt into air so that it is being a part of the material world in which the making of the "new" is practical, theoretical, and even ideological. The "ever-expanding, drastically fluctuating"[4] capitalist market hosted such socio-political and cultural processes of innovating the old during the early twentieth century, processes that led artists and writers to radically alter tradition if not to break with it completely—industrialization, urbanization, mass movements, demographic changes—and those processes ultimately gave Modernists self-conscious power to experiment and change the world by their own. Therefore, the world became the context, and Modernists experimented with forms along with the use of techniques that drew attention to the processes of creating the works of art, literature, philosophy, and political environment of an industrialized society in the flux of materialist changes during the early twentieth century was based on the making of the new. Everything can be modern and it makes the term's definition highly contextual.

In this sense, the definition of the term "postmodern" is also very contextual. To suggest a provisional way for distinguishing postmodernism, one might claim that postmodernists pursue constant changes. But such an oversimplified suggestion does

[3] Marx, p. 13.
[4] Berman, p. 15.

not, of course, explain, as it stands: it is not the case that everything has constantly changed since the 1960s and many seem barely to change at all. To understand how the so-called "postmodern" is different from the "modern," I refer to Fredric Jameson's remarks defining postmodernism during his lecture at the Whitney Museum in 1982, which has been one of the initial theoretical treatments of postmodernism as an intellectual trend and a socio-economic phenomenon as well as a historical period. In "Postmodernism and Consumer Society,"[5] Jameson declares two qualities of postmodernism antithetical to Modernism: (i) it reacts against the structural "high Modernism" that conquered the higher education, art, and philosophy; and (ii) it eliminates what distinguished "high culture" from "mass or popular culture." He specifies that the generation from the 1960s has to "destroy" the dominant abstract styles of "high Modernism" which conquered the academics and popular culture (13). Accepting this idea of considering postmodernism as an antithetical to Modernism, we can suggest that postmodernism is equivalent to spasmodic reaction of "the generation from the 1960s" to escape from high Modernism. That is to say, then, if we are to refer to postmodernism, we are not referring to simply a historical period but responding to very efforts of generations since the 1960s to aim innovating the high Modernism.

However, what needs to be noted in Jameson's explanation is that postmodernism, as much as how it is antithetical to Modernism, has been presented as a socio-political and cultural perspective, relying on economic processes—capitalism, globalization. A focus on these themes implies that Jameson's definition of

[5] Jameson, p. 13; this essay is a transcription of Jameson's lecture at the Whitney Museum of Contemporary Arts in the fall of 1982.

postmodernism is retrospective to the tradition of the Hegelian interpretation of Modernism that incorporates dialectical development with a materialist reading of Marx. In other words, Jameson's explanation of postmodernism relies on labeling it as poststructuralist concept that clashes with high Modernism but its methodology extends the ways that Modernism positioned the world as *our* socio-economic context. As it keeps subordinating art to the reason of consumerism in socio-political agendas—class struggles, high cultures—that is, theoretical treatments of postmodernism, as exemplified by Jameson's explanation, implies that postmodernism as an antithesis to Modernism could paradoxically be regarded as another phase of Modernism.

If we consider postmodernism as another phase of Modernism, postmodernist challenging the Modernist supposition that that language is neutral to what it signifies also requires contextual analysis of critics. To suggest how a handful of critics and scholars innovated language theories for reading postmodernist poetry, we need to consider Derrida's deconstruction of the metaphysics in language: the written language is primary in contemporary culture. The signified meaning of a written word is characterized by constant supplementary meanings, and such meanings are derived from more concepts and views of a language system. For Derrida, *deferring* and *differing* meanings in language catalyze what he calls "différance" in readers (18). Many postmodern poetics are derived from the aesthetics of this Derridean deconstruction of language. For example, a contemporary poet Robert Hass writes the following lines in his poem "Meditation at Lagunitas:"

> … Or the other notion that,
>
> because there is in this world no one thing

to which the bramble of *blackberry* corresponds,

a word is elegy to what it signifies. (Hass 4)

The word "blackberry" in the poem is specifically referred to "elegy to what it signifies," that is to say, words do not simply represent what it signifies but they *are* what they are.

The postmodernist poetics of critics such as Charles Altieri and Marjorie Perloff valorize derive from the Derridean deconstruction of the metaphysics in language: written language acquires supplementary meanings beyond what it signifies and beyond the presence of the poet in language. In "Some Problems about Agency and the Theories of Radical Poetics," Altieri writes, for instance:

> I think we need a notion of absorption that does not collapse rhetoricity into materiality but keeps attention focused on the rhetorical project carried out by the poem. And then absorption is not into the world per se but into ways of acting in relation to that world. …Absorption is sustained by movements against the text, movements attentive not only to rhetoricity but to how fully this attention can carry over into the world beyond the text. (231)

This critical orientation exemplifies how postmodernist criticism supplements additional meanings and how postmodern poetic texts can, therefore, function as paradigms for readers to modify their relationships with "the world beyond the text." Similarly, in *Radical Artifice*, Marjorie Perloff argues that what dominated American poetry until the mid-twentieth century was poetic language that tried to represent "real world" speech and action and that the act of writing made "*present* what the poet" wished to say (32). However, she argues that since the 1960s, postmodernists started to criticize this logocentric presence in poetry of the Beats and Black Mountain poets

that succeeded the Modernist treatment of language. She writes:

> This doctrine goes counter to everything poststructuralist theory has taught us: if writing is regarded, not as the linear representation of a prior "full" or "originary" speech, but as what Derrida calls a "sequence of differences," a sequence in which the phonemic, graphemic, and ideographic elements of language are brought into play, then we may expect to find a poetic composition that is neither conventionally metrical on the one hand, nor breath-determined or "intonational" on the other (137-38).

Perloff adopts the Derridean notion of "différance" in written language and the Lacanian premise that all experience is mediated by language, claiming the arbitrary forms and rules of postmodern poetry. This kind of radical poetics describe the poetry of John Ashbery, Charles Bernstein, Susan Howe, and the others that Perloff praises.

To extend Jameson's remarks to what Altieri and Perloff claim, postmodern poetries definitely represent significant changes compared to the early twentieth century: (i) compositional rules and forms are diversified; (ii) the written language is primary and therefore conveys more meanings than what the poet originally wanted to say as long as readers *defer* and *differ* in Derridean terms; and therefore (iii) language becomes highly self-conscious and self-reflexive for readers. This understanding of postmodern poetry expands the role of readers in poetry. As Altieri states, "we can understand why personal agency plays so central a role in" poems until the mid-twentieth century whereas postmodernist poets developed "a model of language" in which "the play of absorption and anti-absorption" enables readers to consider the text not as object but as "interface between selves and worlds" (234). Enjoying the pleasure of deferring and differing language with highly self-conscious and self-

reflexive readings of poetry, not every reader imagines the presence of the poet but many satisfy the goal of postmodern poetry by communicating with the written words.

Schiller's *Schein* and Kant's Productive Imagination

In this sense, Altieri and Perloff successfully developed language theory to suggest an appropriate methodology to respond to the Derridean deconstruction of language in poetry and to its diversified compositional rules and forms by prioritizing the written language. But language theory faces a paradoxical challenge at this point. Because of the divorce from referentiality to the world and the presence of the poet, the poetry of *différance* focuses on its hermetic textuality: Derrida states in *Of Grammatology* "there is nothing outside of the text" (158). The problem with this hermeneutic textuality is that it ignores that there are many poems situated in socioeconomic realities at the moment of their composition. Denying every space for extralinguistic elements of language in poetry not only enables readers to be self-conscious but also restricts meanings in postmodernist poetry only to the lexical systems so that it enforces interdisciplinary limits that ostracizes the strong tradition of poetry that has been engaging with the presence of modern socio-political agendas: class struggles, gender binary, totalitarianism, race, violence, etc.

While embracing the Derridean interplay of *deferring* and *differing*, to insert a space for extralinguistic praxis against the reductionist stance of Derrida is difficult. To contest this inimical relationship suggested between postmodern literary theory and the socio-economic contexts in poetry, first of all, it is important to recognize that every meaning of language is noncategorical in aesthetic experiences and poetry has been traditionally aligned with aesthetics shaped by the abstraction of nonverbal

arts—such as Ezra Pound's Vorticism inspired by Cubism. Especially to Modernists, such traditional treatments were quintessential practices as poetry was a uniquely-positioned medium that abstracted modern experience. As the canonized Modernist poems since World War I have been necessarily obscure, the mission of critics was to ease such obscurities. Postmodernist poetry does controvert such Modernist obscurities and abstraction, such as the Poundian treatment of image as the primary pigment of poetry and the obscurity of Stevens' vague persona and symbolism—as Stevens himself also indicates in one of his letters that "a poem of symbols exists for itself. You do not pierce an actor's make-up…you do not bother about the face beneath. The poem is the poem, not its paraphrase," he believed that readers are not allowed to interpret his symbols definitively.[6] It is important to note that such aesthetics may create conditions of experience regardless of the author's purpose. To understand this more theoretically, I suggest that we should pay attention to the relevance of Schiller's concept of *Schein*—translated as "semblance" in English.[7] Although scholars contextualize Schiller's concept with the Nietzschean falsity theory of art, explaining the concept of *Schein* arises from our frequent recourse to inverted commas when we use the words "real" or "actual," in which we playfully treat something "as if" they were real characters and actual situations. Schiller conceptualizes two kinds of semblances: "aesthetic semblance" and "fine semblance."[8] My focus in this introduction is the former. Schiller defines aesthetic experience as a combination of *Schein* and play; he argues that aesthetic experience is

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[6] Stevens, p. 360.

[7] For a full discussion of how significant the concept of *schein* is, look at Wilkinson, "Schiller's Concept of Schein in the Light of Recent Aesthetics."

[8] In German, the original terms are: ästhetischer Schein and scho¨ner Schein. Translations are my own, combining the result of searching dictionaries.

characterized by taking objects as they seem, rather than trying to define what they are. In the philosophical treatise, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, Schiller claims that art and aesthetic appreciation are inseparable; to determine *Schein*, semblance, as aesthetic, it must be separated from reality by abandoning claims to it.[9] When a piece of art deceives us that it is not art but reality, the semblance does not require reality in order to have its effect in that aesthetic experience, according to Schiller, as its resemblances are the result of subjective judgments. In this sense, the more a piece of art resembles a real object, the more aesthetic appreciation becomes the form that the artist has imposed on, not the reality. This implies that whether artists effectively lead their audiences to whatever direction they originally aimed for in the aesthetic experience depends heavily on whether the resemblance of their works deceives us. Although Schiller accepted this idea that art is imitative, he rejects the idea that it fosters duplicity in the aesthetic experience, which fundamentally requires us to distinguish the real from the fake. When we imagine what the work of art either indicates or implies, the process of aesthetic experience and judgment, paradoxically, then orients the real away from the imitation that we enjoy. Thus, this combined account of aesthetic experience and the subjective judgment for distinguishing *Schein* suggests that every object's significance in the aesthetic experience is noncategorical. That is, it shapes art as neither descriptive nor the process of knowing something but as a form of expression and aesthetic experience.

But while Schiller's theory suggests that every signification by linguistic elements in poetry is determined by the subjective judgments of readers and that the meaning of every word and syntactical frame is therefore equivocal, it also requires

[9] Schiller, *Nationalaugsgabe*, Volume 20; look at page 402 in volume 20.

imagination to be the fundamental process of the aesthetic experience, as determining *Schein*, that is, evaluating the resemblance of the fake, is also an imaginative process. In this sense, imagination is the vital practice in aesthetic experience. Conversely, aligning poetry with rhetoric—the combination of persuasive arguments and the demonstration of them to shape a certain attitude or thought among the public and establish an ethos that exemplifies common virtues that audiences want to find—that conveys political values requires that readers be able to make communal judgments about the aesthetic experience.

To suggest how the imaginative judgments could be communal, we need to expand the definition of imagination and its relationship with resemblance in the aesthetic experience. To do so, I refer to the Kantian critique on imagination in *Critique of Pure Reason*. Although Kant neither had a publication that exclusively discuss the notion of the imagination nor specifically contextualized it with the aesthetic experience, I believe the chapter entitled "The Deduction of the Pure Concepts of Understanding" elaborates much of his thought on the imagination. According to Kant's remarks defining imagination that contrasts it to the apperception, we receive stimuli in the form of raw sensory material, and each intuition contains multiplicity that cannot be represented as a manifold. For Kant, the synthesis of such intuitions in the apprehension is the empirical dimension of imagination. On the other hand, there is a transcendental dimension of imagination that is a prerequisite for knowledge; in short, the act of schematizing. When there is a particular schema that subsumes such intuitions, Kant calls the phenomenon either "figurative synthesis" or "productive imagination" (Part B, 151). This productive imagination, the act of schematizing, is "an art concealed in the depths of the human

soul" (Kant, Part A, 141). This productive dimension of imagination orients us to synthesize the intuitions, reproduce images, and schematize. For Kant, the schematization is the vital condition for providing significance to objects and categories whereas the unschematized—such as gods—cannot be understood. Ironically, this productive imagination, the act of schematizing, is the postulate of Schiller's account of *Schein*. As determining the semblance makes every meaning in aesthetic experiences irreducibly relative, the subjective judgments that we make in those experiences require schematization as their prerequisite. Because the subjective judgments are also the upshot of the schematization, we can reflect that this process-oriented dialectical model of rationality in this combined account of Kantian productive imagination and Schiller's theory reveals that the noncategorical meaning of an object in the aesthetic experience is also schematized and the subjective judgments can therefore be communal.

This communality is what potentially recuperates the resemblance of an object's aesthetic semblance to the real and allows the aesthetic experience to convey political values. In other words, whereas the meaning of language in postmodernist poetry is infinitely regressed, understanding it inevitably requires us to schematize it. The schematizing of the meaning, that is, the attempt to understand the meaning of language in the literary experience, suggests that the aesthetics of poetry need not to be located exclusively in analogies with abstract arts that detach the referentiality of language from reality. Therefore, distinguishing the relevance of the schematization in the aesthetic experience recuperates the referentiality of language in poetry to the reality. As this referentiality is shaped by the determination of the poet to tap into the interpretive power of readers and their schematization, the communality of their

subjective judgments implies the rhetorical impulse of poetry. Within the rhetorical work, the poet as a rhetor aims to create an "imagined community" among the audience that Benedict Anderson describes in *Imagined Communities*. For example, Anderson explains how the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier broadens the reach of a massive group of people it configures precisely by evacuating their act of memorialization of specific content.[10] In that respect, the cenotaph recapitulates historical deployments of an abstract and universal subject position—such as that of the citizen—as a means of constituting a reciprocally abstract and universal mass collective. This rhetoric relies on the imaginative capacity of the communities it shapes in the public. A public—according to Michael Warner, the self-organized social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse among strangers—acts historically in accord with the temporality of the reflexive circulation.[11] In other words, the rhetoric facilitates cultural renewal and creates the punctual circulation that establishes the imagined communities among readers. As Warner schematizes, "the more punctual and abbreviated the circulation, and the more discourse indexes the punctuality of its own circulation, the closer a public stands to politics" (68).

Therefore, the interpretive powers that poets bring to poetry provide powerful capacities to engage non-aesthetic elements. To provide an exemplary model of the poetic forms that are rhetorical and aim at establishing communities based on the schematized judgments of readers, I refer to William Carlos Williams, who valorizes poetics that exemplify process-oriented rhetoricity. Williams claims, in *Spring and All*, that reading poetry dynamizes the effect of imagination "to free the world of fact

[10] Anderson, p. 9.
[11] For a full discussion about the definition of a public, see Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics."

from the impositions of “art” and to liberate the man to act in whatever direction his disposition leads” (92). This claim derived from his Modernist impulse to reverse the use of language as a symbol in poetry—the practice that is especially formalized by Stevens, Moore, and other high Modernists.[12] As many poets of the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century can be placed in this symbolist tradition, we can reflect that Williams criticizes specifically Modernist poets who valorized the Modernist legacy of aligning poetry with the abstraction of nonverbal arts. He believes that such symbolist poems are inevitably steeped in “incomprehensibility” that evokes “insignificant images” (21). Because such compositions do not consider the different perspectives that readers have when they read, he suggests an alternative:

> What I put down of value will have this value: an escape from crude symbolism, the annihilation of strained associations, complicated ritualistic forms designed to separate the work from <<reality>>—such as rhyme, meter and not as the essential of the work, one of its words…The work will be in the realm of the imagination as plain as the sky is to a fisherman—a very clouded sentence. (22)

With this pursuit of plain language, Williams vitalizes the universality of language in composition and fortifies its reference to reality. Then he claims that the imagination becomes a certain power by which we can understand the real world in a new way. He writes:

> Sometimes I speak of imagination as a force, an electricity or a medium, a place. It is immaterial which: for whether it is the condition of a place or a

[12] Many critics claim that Williams’ stance in *Spring and All* was to challenge Eliot and Moore. *Spring and All* is a hybrid-work, and the poem does have resemblances to Eliot’s *The Waste Land* in contextualizing postwar landscapes. For the full context of how Williams contrasts his work with that of from Eliot and other Modernists, look at the poems in *Spring and All*. His claim about the imagination is included in the prose sections.

> dynamization its effect is the same: to free the world of fact from the impositions of "art" and to liberate the man to act in whatever direction his disposition leads. (92)

Earlier he had said that the imagination is "the classic caress of author and reader," suggesting that imagination is a force created by the interaction between a poet and readers (22; 4). This conception of imagination and experimental language is crucial to understanding Williams' commitment to a rhetorical poetics that engages with socio-political realities and to a concept of imagination that facilitates his public intellectual manner as a poet of the street as well as the local doctor of New Jersey. I think it is useful to mention that this commitment marked a significant change in his career. Until the early-1930s, as Milton Cohen elaborates, Williams had not "abandoned his modernist belief in the supremacy of the word, in seeing the poem as an object" (144). According to the letter he sent to Kay Boyle:

> The occasional pushing notion that the form of poetry (as that of any art) is social in character. Such an opinion is purest superficiality. The form of poetry is that of language. It is related to all art first, then to certain essential characteristics of language, to words … Poetry is related to poetry, not to social statutes (*Selected Letters* 130-1).

But as the radical Left emerged during the Great Depression, he became more involved in leftist literary politics, as did many as other writers of the 1930s. His poetics changed as his politics changed, not only a poet but also as the documentarian of New Jersey, the egalitarian, and a stalwart of leftist politics—as Allen Ginsberg famously mourns the death of Williams in 1963, "Mourn O Ye Angels of the Left

Wing! that the poet / of the streets is a skeleton under the pavement now."[13] As one of the writers who also had a successful career as a physician, he "witnessed the privations of his working-class patients." (Cohen 144). The use of plain language and the pursuit of self-reflexive imagination would have made his poems comprehensible and *imaginable* to the majority of the proletariat during the 1930s. The successful pursuit of the *imaginable* language and rhetorical contexts in the middle of this change was one of his later works, *Paterson*. He draws attention of the readers to the mind at the beginning: "Rigor of beauty is the quest. But how will you find beauty when it is locked in the mind past all remonstrance?" (*Paterson* 3) This statement implies that his poem's quest is to find beauty, as the protagonist of the poem struggles to interpret the Falls of the Passaic River and the study of American language. The protagonist, Paterson, is described as a city, a doctor, a poet, and a young man. In the middle of the narrative about this figure, Williams incorporates prosaic materials written in plain languages—historical documents, newspapers, geological surveys, literary texts, and personal letters. By adapting such non-literary language into poetic forms, *Paterson* demonstrates not only a lyric form that criticizes Modernist symbolism but also "the resemblance between the mind of modern man and the city" through descriptions of the protagonist (Beach 109). The interpretive power of readers that he endorses here negotiates with readers about the construction of imagined communities by contextualizing the semblance of a modern man and the city. Although one might claim that Williams could be regarded as a forefather of rhetoric that revives determinacy of the poet that allows readers to gain an interpretive

[13] Allen Ginsberg wrote an elegiac poem for Williams on March 20, 1963, three weeks after Williams passed away. For a full poem, look at "Death News" in *Visiting Dr. Williams*.

power to socio-economic reality, this fusion of aesthetics and rhetoric in *Paterson* suggests that the semblance is crucial both to the poet and readers as it allows readers to gain interpretive power in the way that the poet originally designated. This rhetoric thus not only constitutes and exemplifies an intertextual and intergeneric public among readers and but also positions Williams as a rhetor whose texts circulated intellectual conversation across the public politically throughout the twentieth century.

Statement

As exemplified by *Spring and All* and *Paterson*, it is then the poet's determination to be another rhetor in his work and imagination is the process through which readers apply their inherent schemata to understand the meaning of language. As the poet writes poems, his poetry is characterized not only by aesthetic craft but also by the potentially-political values. In light of all this, my thesis explores some of the ways in which the work of contemporary poets, as they assume the mantle of public intellectuals, reinvigorates the rhetorical impulses of imagination and thereby creates imagined communities through targeting a mass audience and generalizing citizens as a public in our loosely defined contemporary moments. As poets have long been interested in poetry's literary value to foment and critique the production of virtual and actual modes of togetherness, I aim to address poetry's engagements with collectivity after the rise of mass media and consumer culture and the opening up of political and aesthetic representation to diverse audiences. In the first chapter, I will discuss how the poets during the Harlem Renaissance valorized poetic rhetoric and will demonstrate how their rhetoric has been revitalized by the recent ascendence of Black poetry since the 1980s, with Natasha Trethewey's poetry and poetics as my exemplary case in point. In the second chapter, I attempt to extend the public

intellectualism of this poetic rhetoric as a global literary phenomenon beyond English poetry by marking the intersection between Muriel Rukeyser's documentary poetics and the work of a contemporary Chilean poet, Raul Zurita.

As we explore how Trethewey and Zurita represent a global poetic rhetoric and how the contemporary practitioners of the Kantian imagination have brought the poetic rhetoric into the mainstream culture over the last few decades, I think we need to keep in mind that we are living in the twenty-first century, that is, among the poetry-phobic generations. As metrophobia is common among the new millennials, the body of this thesis also aims at illuminating how the non-literary aesthetics and the diversified poetic forms of global poetic rhetoric have satisfied them. I hope my thesis will contribute to the defense of literary studies from the devaluation that they have undergone in mainstream culture and academia.

Chapter 1

Despite my initial bewilderment, I have come to love thinking about a question that the poet Major Jackson posed in a seminar on the Dark Room Collective: can we suggest any reason why African-American poets are usually excluded from the canon of American Modernist poetry? Alas, I wish I could have denied that I myself think of Eliot, Pound, Stevens, Moore, and Williams as the significant names in Modernist poetry before considering relevant African-American poets, but the long silence in the classroom signified that I was not alone. Considering that their literary ancestors were overlooked by the mainstream culture in the US, I think what contemporary Black poets have achieved over the last three decades has been culturally remarkable. Notably, there have already been five Black poets who have been awarded the Pulitzer Prize over the last decade—Natasha Trethewey, Tracy K. Smith, Gregory Pardlo, Tyehimba Jess, and, most recently, Jericho Brown in 2020—whereas it took thirty-seven years for another Black poet to win the Pulitzer Prize after Gwendolyn Brooks in 1950. In addition, there have been six Black poets who have won the National Book Award in poetry since 2000 and four who have received the National Book Critics Circle Award since 2014.[14] In light of such achievements, I believe we can suggest that contemporary Black poets have gained more public visibility and have more presence in, and influence on, literary studies and the humanities than was the case for their forefathers in the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement.

[14] The winner of the former includes: Lucille Clifton in 2000; Nathaniel Mackey in 2006; Terrence Hayes in 2010; Nikki Finney in 2011; Robin Costa Lewis in 2015, and Justin Philip in 2018. The latter consists of: Claudia Rankine in 2014; Ross Gay in 2015; Ishion Hutchinson in 2016; and Morgan Parker in 2019.

How can we explain this phenomenon? Why have African-American poets been peripheral hitherto in critical discussions of modern poetry whereas a number of Black poets have emerged as central to American poetry and poetics in the past decade? I believe that Black poetry in America has followed a discernible trajectory over the course of the twentieth century: from the Black aesthetic shaped by the Harlem Renaissance through the increasingly rhetorical—as opposed to aesthetic stance—of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, and into a comparative decline in the 1980s and -90s that coincides with the decline of the Black consciousness movement in America by the late 1970s.[15] A powerful shift emerges, however, in the past twenty years, marking the move to center stage of a group of younger black poets who urge us to consider their work as the discursive fusion of rhetorical act and aesthetic object. That fusion reinvigorates the cumulative legacies of the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement in a new movement that many critics and writers signal a Black poetry renaissance. My argument is that the writers of this new age—notably such figures as Trethewey, Rankine, Smith, and Brown—take it upon themselves to perform the role of public intellectuals in an era of increasingly pluralized politics by reintegrating and extending the rhetorical lyric practice of the Harlem Renaissance poets and by engaging with the emergence of a new Black aesthetic in the so-called "post-soul" era. The argument that the these poets recuperate and extend the rhetoric of the Harlem Renaissance has three implications: (i) it calls into question the idea among contemporary critics that the Harlem Renaissance was "regional" and "local" to Harlem and therefore peripheral to discussions of high

[15] By the 1970s, the FBI's COINTELPRO infiltrated all major Black political organizations, such as the Black Panther Party. The popularity of Black poetry had declined along with this downfall.

Modernism; (ii) it identifies how transhistorical the poetic rhetoric of the Harlem Renaissance poets has been in Black poetry; and (iii) it allows us to discover how certain contemporary black poets have rejuvenated Black poetry in the era of the new Black aesthetic. My schema consists of two parts. First, I will explore how the rhetoric of the Harlem Renaissance poets conveys the social value of poetry by building African-American communities in the early twentieth century, and I will contextualize how those poets have been comparatively neglected in academic discourse. Afterward, I will illustrate the literary hybridity of the work of the Black Poetry Renaissance poets by examining the ways in which the poetry and poetics of Natasha Trethewey facilitate historical memory and erasure. Her achievements are remarkable, and I feature her here as exemplary of this new age of Black poetry: she won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 2007, and in 2012 she was the first poet to be appointed to both national and state poet laureateships simultaneously.

The Harlem Renaissance and the Public of a Literary Text

I need first to account for the literary achievement of the Harlem Renaissance poets who subscribed to the aesthetics of literary Modernism while they were attempting to elaborate a poetics that would enable them to create racial unity in African-American communities through the constitutive role of rhetoric in shaping the Black aesthetic. Since rhetoric is associated with a willingness to build communities rather than to construct isolated texts with exemplary literary craft, their rhetorical purpose challenges the notion of the poem as purely aesthetic object that has dominated both traditional and experimental views of literature over the last century, when aesthetic commitments have often bound poets closely to non-literary arts—as in the cases of Ezra Pound's Vorticism and the painterly abstractions of the New York

School poets—thus minimizing the poets' use of the rhetorical resources that enable poetry to engage social forces. Because we cannot dispense with the historical upheavals of the Black community in America that African-American poetry has traditionally contextualized, the history of how African-American poetry ties itself to rhetoric that builds communities in resistance to racial dominance can be told in many ways—going back to the autobiographical slave narratives of the nineteenth century and to late eighteenth-century African writers such as Phillis Wheatley. In this sense, we can suggest that the Harlem Renaissance is especially significant both as cultural and literary movement because the rhetoric of the artists and writers who led the movement—such as Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and the other artists that Alain Locke anthologized in *The New Negro*—has been crucial for shaping the socio-political identities of African-Americans in the US.[16] If we consider the impact of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 60s, we can suggest that the pursuit of equal rights signifies that many Black Americans by the mid-twentieth century had climbed over the "racial mountain" that Hughes had identified in the early twentieth-century:

> One of the most promising of the young Negro poets said to me once, "I want to be a poet—not a Negro poet," meaning I believe, "I want to write like a white poet"; meaning subconsciously, "I would like to be a white poet"; meaning behind that, "I would like to be white." . . . [T]his is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America—this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American

[16] The Harlem renaissance was also known as the "New Negro Movement" and it was named after Alain Locke's anthology *The New Negro*, which included the work of artists who led the movement—Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, etc.

standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible. ("The Negro Artist")

The African-American identity that was defined by the writers of the Harlem Renaissance during the 1920s not only signifies what Black people had been through but also implies how the meaning of "American" was racialized and represented by the binary opposition of blackness and whiteness at the beginning of twentieth century. This core idea that the Harlem Renaissance poets thematically contextualized is considered significant in defining Black aesthetics in African-American literary culture, and, more importantly, it did instill social consciousness and awareness in Black culture within the flux of Modernism. Langston Hughes' first publication *The Weary Blues* exemplifies the way Black artists developed a style that signified a Black identity. At the end of the poem "The Weary Blues," Hughes fuses jazz and blues with a traditional form of verse:

He played a few chords then he sang some more—

. . .

And far into the night he crooned that tune.

The stars went out and so did the moon.

The singer stopped playing and went to bed

While the Weary Blues echoed through his head.

He slept like a rock or a man that's dead. (50)

Hughes describes a pianist who performs jazz in this stanza while literally performing the blues through him. The "weary" blues creates a sense of mourning that Hughes ties to Black music. This poetic depiction ties the "weary" blues to the quality of blackness and therefore complicates the concept of blackness beyond its literal

definition as a color. This rhetorical strategy demonstrates how the Harlem Renaissance brought the Modernist impulse of self-consciousness to African-American communities during the 1920s. This rhetorical strategy demonstrates how the Harlem Renaissance brought the Modernist impulse of self-consciousness to African-American communities during the 1920s, fusing that self-consciousness with racial oppositions to create a distinctive Black aesthetics in pursuit of a unified African-American experience within American identity. Hughes signifies this pursuit when he has a Black student speak to his teacher in "Theme for English B": "You are white— / yet a part of me, as I am a part of you. That's American." The acme of Black literary Modernism, the poetic rhetoric that forged the racial unity and aesthetics of the artists and scholars who led the Harlem Renaissance was recognized by the mainstream and planted the seeds of the later Civil Rights Movement that emerged in the 1950s.

Now, let us return to the neglected and underappreciated status of such literary and socio-political achievements in academic discourse. Literary studies tend to prioritize the aesthetic value of exemplary literary craft in poetry as the ultimate measure of compositional power while projecting a slanted view of Black poets that oversimplifies their literary achievement, too often reducing it to the rhetorical dimension. To exemplify this, I refer to the 2011 dialogue between Rita Dove and Helen Vendler in *The New York Review of Books* about Vendler's review of *The Penguin Anthology of Twentieth-Century American Poetry*.[17] At the beginning of her review, Vendler writes:

[17] For a full dialogue, see Vendler's "Are These the Poems to Remember?" and Dove's reply "Defending an Anthology" in *The New York Review of Books*.

> Twentieth-century American poetry has been one of the glories of modern literature. The most significant names and texts are known worldwide: T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, Hart Crane, Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Elizabeth Bishop (and some would include Ezra Pound). Rita Dove, a recent poet laureate (1993–1995), has decided, in her new anthology of poetry of the past century, to shift the balance, introducing more black poets and giving them significant amounts of space, in some cases more space than is given to better-known authors. These writers are included in some cases for their representative themes rather than their style … Which of Dove's 175 poets will have staying power, and which will seep back into the archives of sociology?

In short, Dove, as an editor of the anthology, defended her choice from Vendler's "illogical assertions and haphazard conclusions" that mistreat "the inclusion of Black Arts poetry [as] an indication of animated endorsement." Although Vendler's list of exemplary poets could be seen as racist since it consists of entirely white poets, I do not believe it is. Instead, her skeptical dismissal of the work of Black poets as being in "the archives of sociology" suggests that they tend to be recognized for their "themes" rather than "style" in academic discourse. Here, I am not attempting to determine whether Vendler's priority of "style" over social value is appropriate for measuring the compositional power of a poet and whether Black poets had less influential styles of composition than their contemporaries of the Lost Generation. What is important is that prioritizing aesthetic value over socio-political and cultural values in evaluating literary compositions has governed both traditional and experimental views of poetry over the last century, and that priority has meshed quite comfortably with the

domestication of poetry as bourgeois literature since the nineteenth century. In addition, the belief that poetry is bourgeois literature still remains dominant in the mainstream culture, and it ultimately led to a formalized tendency in academic discourse to project a slanted view of Black poetry.

In light of this marginalized status of Black poetry in academic discourse, it is important to notice that Black poetry has followed two divergent trajectories since the 1980s that foreground the emergence of this Black poetry renaissance. Given the lowkey reception of post-BAM poets in the 1980s and -90s the underappreciated status of their work in academic discourse, I think it is worth pointing out that, as Charles Henry Rowell also noted in the currents of Black poetry, MFA programs have been crucial for younger Black poets after the 1980s in what could be seen as a successful bid to reverse the underappreciation of Black poetry in the academic world.[18] Compared to the rhetoric of the Harlem Renaissance poets and the critiques of social injustice of the BAM poets, Black poets educated and trained through MFA programs have been involved in the larger academic culture and have attained mastery over the forms of poetry. Their education sets them apart from most previous twentieth-century black poets who studied independently. In this sense, we can suggest that MFA programs provided both the education and the platform from which Black poets have amplified their voices within literature and the humanities. At the same time, we also need to consider the enormous cultural changes for the Black community throughout the socio-political upheavals of the twentieth century. By

[18] Amiri Baraka makes remarks in his essay entitled "A Post-Racial Anthology?" in response to *Angles of Ascent*, the anthology edited by Rowell, that "Rowell thinks the majority of Afro-American poets are MFA recipients or professors…Rowell gives us a generous helping of these university types, many co-sanctioned by the Cave Canem group…presents a group portrait of Afro-American poets as mfa recipients." For a full discussion, see "A Post-Racial Anthology" in *Poetry* magazine.

treating the Harlem Renaissance as the beginning of African-American Modernism, we can suggest that the term "post-soul" is used by contemporary critics and scholars to demarcate the postmodernist experiences of African-Americans. The term itself is used the first by Nelson George in his 1992 attempt to reshape post-1960s Black culture by focusing on the socio-political and cultural effects of the Civil Rights Movement:

> IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN WHEN mobile DJs began rocking Kraftwerk's Trans-Europe Express in 1977 or when WBLS's slogan shifted from "the total black experience in sound" to "the total experience in sound" to "the world's best-looking sound." Or when dressing down to dress up became the new Saturday-night aesthetic of high school teens...Over the last 20 or so years, the tenor of African American culture has changed...Today I live in a time of goin'-for-mine materialism, secular beat consciousness, and a more diverse, fragmented, even postmodern black community...a definition of African American culture, and the code word for our national identity, soul has pretty much been dead since Nixon's reelection in 1972. But what's replaced it? ... the spawn of the post-soul era display multiple personalities.

George treats the racial, political and cultural advancement that the "postmodern" Black community experienced during the 1970s as a socio-economic phenomenon. Whereas the Harlem Renaissance emphasized the importance of unifying the identity of Black culture, according to George, in the contemporary moment the Black community has been diversified, fragmented, and deconstructed in relation to individuality, interraciality, class struggles, and gender. This construction of the post-soul culture aligns with an attempt to distinguish the new Black aesthetic that derived

from its postmodernity. Thus we see a simultaneous fragmentation and diffusion of the postmodern experience of African Americans in the post-soul culture, as Trey Ellis argues that contemporary African-Americans have realized that they "share a lot more than just skin color" and see "the black aesthetic as much more than just Africa and jazz" (234).[19]

Natasha Trethewey and Literary Photography

In light of all this, we can suggest that MFA programs and post-soul aesthetics were crucial for the ascending visibility of contemporary Black poetry in academic discourse and our public spheres as Black poets were exposed to higher levels of education and as Black culture adapted postmodernity to Black aesthetics. As a result, we have entered a new age of African-American poetry, a Black poetry renaissance. Natasha Trethewey's poems exemplify the hybridity that centralized Black poetry in contemporary academic discourse—the experimental fusion of rhetoric about the new Black aesthetic with formal innovation in poetry and poetics. The five collections of her poems derived from her life as an interracial woman from the South recapitulate all the socio-political and cultural cataclysms of the Black community.

In considering Trethewey's poetics, let us start by with the interview with Lisa DeVries that introduces Trethewey's Pulitzer Prize winning work, *Native Guard*:

> I think my story is the quintessential American story; this miscegenation is America, this history across the color line intersected is America. It is [a] truly American story that we have been waiting for someone to tell. A Civil War history is bringing to light those stories that get subsumed and erased. This

[19] For the full discussion, look at Ellis' 1989 essay "The New Black Aesthetic."

> book seeks to tell a fuller story of our history as Americans. Not "this" side, or "that" side, because there are no sides. We are not two trains running on separate tracks in America; it is all intertwined, and here is a book that says so, such as when the black soldier is writing letters home for the illiterate white soldier, and their voices become mingled, one, as he writes for the other. The story mingles in my own blood; it is that voice that has to tell the story. (106)

Trethewey here introduces two of her signature moves that derive from Harlem Renaissance rhetoric and post-soul culture: (i) revisiting the history and racial legacy of America; (ii) and mingling voices beyond racial opposition. She turns herself into an explorer of the forgotten history of the Civil War in *Native Guard* while mourning her mother's death in the elegies. Although the interview with DeVries is mainly about *Native Guard*, Trethewey's explanation suggests the ways in which the full body of her work extends the rhetoric of the Harlem Renaissance:

> My obsessions stay the same—historical memory and historical erasure. I am particularly interested in the Americas and how a history that is rooted in colonialism, the language and iconography of empire, disenfranchisement, the enslavement of peoples, and the way that people were sectioned off because of blood. I am moving away from the American South, and moving away from the 20th and 19th centuries, but in terms of the research I always do, that has stayed the same. I am interested in 18th century natural philosophy, science, particularly botany, the study of hybridity in plants and animals, which, of course, then allows me to consider the hybridity of language. (DeVris 107)

These ideas of historical memory and erasure are the key to understanding Trethewey's public intellectual manner precisely because they are not a solely

personal process but also promote and extol a public-oriented, cultural renewal. Although Trethewey seeks language beyond the American South and the history of the last two centuries, her formal innovation does not interfere with her making pervasive the history of "the way that people were sectioned off because of blood." The socio-political upheavals that African-American people have been through are also part of that history. Trethewey's work facilitates cultural renewal by marking the intersection of private and public history—as *Native Guard* instances this by simultaneously exploring the Civil War and mourning her mother's death—and it therefore extends the rhetoric of the Harlem Renaissance poets to other agendas than the racial opposition in American history. In other words, her work is an attempt to use the rhetoric of Black poetry—that emphasized Black identity against racial dominance by subordinating the individual identities of Black people to their blackness—in an effort to adhere to other social norms that derive from what race has meant in American history. In this sense, Trethewey's obsession with historical memory and erasure exemplifies the hybridity of the Black poetry renaissance: (i) it can be presented as inherently rhetorical at its core, and this, in conjunction with the inherently rhetorical mode of the Harlem Renaissance poets, helps furnish linkages that proactively disambiguate Black rhetoric as a distinctive perspective that emerges from the modern experience of being an American and that point to the central importance of the post-soul perspective by extending it to the realm of postmodernism; and (ii) it reveals a political dimension of imagination that facilitates historical memory and erasure and the ways such processes are driven by an intellectual conversation between the poet and a public to which she as a rhetor gives existence. To suggest an exemplary model of this hybridity in Trethewey's poetry, I

refer to one of the collections of her poems that engages with aesthetics shaped largely by photography, *Bellocq's Ophelia*, and reverses the linear view in literary studies that detaches rhetoric from evaluating the compositional power of a poet.

Trethewey's second collection, *Bellocq's Ophelia* is an ekphrastic work inspired by E.J. Bellocq's photographs from Storyville in 1912. Trethewey learned about his photography when she was a graduate student at the University of Massachusetts in 1996. Bellocq took portraits of women from Storyville, New Orleans, where prostitution had been legal for twenty years, since 1897—some are nude, some dressed, and there are some mysterious poses. Here we encounter a problem, one which Trethewey dealt with. Some of Bellocq's photographs are damaged—many faces were abraded in the gelatin—and there is no information about why those faces were manually scraped out and who those women were other than that they were prostitutes from Storyville. For this reason, Bellocq has remained as a mysterious figure in the history of photography since most of his negatives and prints were destroyed; there must have been more than the 89 portraits of prostitutes that were recovered by photographer Lee Friedlander, who purchased and published the work after Bellocq's death. We can only make assumptions: Bellocq's photographs aesthetically may imply that he, as a commercial photographer, took an active interest in using his photographs as advertisements for the brothel, or that he, as a documentary photographer, "furnish[ed] evidence," assuring the objectivity of what he captured through the eye of the camera (Sontag 5). The portrait of those marginalized prostitutes "seems to have a more innocent, and therefore more accurate, relation to visible reality than do other mimetic objects" (Sontag 6). Trethewey extends the evidentiary mode of these photographs as she quotes Toni Morrison's and

Susan Sontag's discourse as an epigraph at the beginning of the book: (i) "[prostitutes] had nothing to fall back on; not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything. And out of the profound desolation of her reality she may well have invented herself" and (ii) "the camera's rendering of reality must always hide more than it discloses" (*Bellocq's Ophelia* 1). Both quotes imply that the goal of the poem is to revisit what lies outside the photograph's viewpoint and to release the identities of those Black women from bondage. Trethewey credits Sharon Olds as an influential figure for her in writing about photographs, particularly those photographs that document women's working lives: "She can attach meaning to the smallest details in a photograph, and I think that for any poet that's a wonderful thing" (Petty 369). The poetic goal, therefore, is identical to Trethewey's fundamental idea of historical memory and erasure as readers are oriented to Trethewey's imaginative literary world that contextualizes what lies outside the camera's lens. During an interview with Charles Rowell, Trethewey articulates this public intellectual manner:

> I think I've been concerned with what I have noticed to be the erasures of history for a very long time. Those stories often left to silence or oblivion, the gaps within the stories that we are told, both in the larger public historical records and in our family histories as well, the stories within families that people don't talk about, the things that are kept hushed. And so I've always been interested in those contentions between public and cultural memory, larger history and private or family memory and stories. And so I do seek to restore or to recover those subjugated narratives. (Rowell 1022)

Because there is no information, for readers, other than that Bellocq's photography labels these women as prostitutes, *Bellocq's Ophelia* is an attempt to restore their

identities through revealing their histories to the public. In order to understand how Trethewey turns this unknown history of women into a political process of historical memory and erasure by aligning poetry with aesthetics shaped by photography, we should consider her previous works; for example, “Gesture of a Woman-in-Process” in *Domestic Work*, Trethewey’s first collection of poems, is derived from Clifton Johnson’s photograph taken in 1902. She adapts the image into narrative:

> In the foreground, two women,
> their squinting faces
> creased into texture —
> …
> Even now, her hands circling,
> The white blur of her apron
> still in motion. (*Monument* 30)

The narrative adaptation of Johnson’s photograph concentrates on the distinctive movement of the working women, guiding readers to imagine the moment that the original photograph captured. Discussing a photograph of her own family, Trethewey describes her father’s side of the family as “the part of a photograph that from a particular angle you won’t get to see,” and she also widens her poetic ambitions with the language of photography here: “the camera’s angle will be a wider-angle lens, and I’ll be able to include more” (Petty 369). Thus, for Trethewey, photographs provide an interface with history, and her poems become a species of literary photography for readers. She says:

> Every photograph represents a moment that is no longer, passed, as well as ways of being that have disappeared. I've always been a little obsessed with the

> way photographs hold and create an object out of that moment. And I've often thought if you look at a photograph, if you really study the gestures and expressions that the people have in the photograph, you could see the rest of their lives, everything that's to come. (Petty 364)

We can further develop this idea, in broader terms, by considering Trethewey's treatment of photography as an interface to recover unknown history, or in Roland Barthes' term, as "a certificate of presence" that confirms the existence of the referent (87). Trethewey is interested in this "indexical" relationship between the photograph and its referent; through studying the gestures and expressions of people in photograph she sees the rest of their lives.[20] For this reason, Trethewey describes the role of photography as "artifact" in her early work (Petty 366). This treatment of photography as poetic historiography is resonant with Sontag's theoretical treatment of photography as a new literary sphere in the contemporary world. Sontag says:

> Rehabilitating old photographs, by finding new contexts, has become a major book industry. A photograph is only a fragment, and with the passage of time its moorings come unstuck. It drifts away into a soft abstract pastness, open to any kind of reading (or matching to other photographs). A photograph could also be described as a quotation, which makes a book of photographs like a book of quotations. (71)

"Gesture of a Woman-in-Process" is "a book of quotations," and Johnson's photographs are the source of those quotations; thus, Trethewey's intertextuality allows readers to recuperate the captured moment in Johnson's photograph. In this

[20] For a full discussion about the indexical relationship between a photograph and its referent, see Krauss, 197.

sense, Trethewey's imaginative texts formalize what photography cannot visually figure.

Returning to *Bellocq's Ophelia*, then, Trethewey's insight about the indexical relationship between the photograph and its referent treats Bellocq's photographs as artifacts in order to revisit the lives of Storyville's prostitutes. Since many of the portraits were damaged and lack information about the women, Trethewey creates mythopoeic female personae for the literary resurrection of the women in the portraits and confers on at least one of them the Shakespearian pseudonym "Ophelia"—it is not clear how many different subjects the name represents throughout the collection. In the opening poem, "Bellocq's Ophelia," Trethewey exemplifies Sontag's claim by disclosing the hidden life of a Storyville prostitute. Trethewey's literary resurrection of the woman begins with a description of John William Millais's painting of Ophelia:

> In Millais's painting, Ophelia dies faceup,
> eyes and mouth open as if caught in the gasp
> of her last word or breath, flowers and reeds
> growing out of the pond, floating on the surface
> around her. (3)

The first stanza typifies Trethewey's narrative adaptation of visual imagery into poetic language. In the second stanza, Trethewey invites readers to imagine Bellocq's photograph: "I think of her when I see Bellocq's / photograph —" (3). The literary montage of overlapping Bellocq's photograph and Millais's painting shows how Trethewey places specific images as metaphor and subject matter in the poem. In the last stanza, this visual overlap of Millais's painting and Bellocq's photograph identifies the woman in the photograph with Ophelia:

Staring into the camera, she seems to pull

all movement from her slender limbs

and hold it in her heavy-lidded eyes.

Her body limp as dead Ophelia's,

her lips poised to open… (3)

The interplay between photography and poetry in the last stanza signifies how both images and language represent the lifeless women together. This equivalent juxtaposition of images in the literary montage implies that the pseudonym of Trethewey's mythical personae derived from Bellocq's photographs subjugates the individual identities of the Storyville prostitutes to the lifeless image of Ophelia in the painting. The process of historical memory and erasure is manifested by dragging readers into Ophelia's perspective, what Alicia Ostriker might call "revisionary mythmaking," thus bringing them to the political dimension of imagination (212). For Trethewey, the poem itself is an imaginative place for readers to revisit the forgotten history of America, and that history is revised through her imagination of Ophelia's life. In this way, she strategically shifts readers' attention from the individual identities of prostitutes to the socio-political forms of inequality that are associated with their lives.

After portraying Ophelia in the first poem, Trethewey adapts the moments captured in Bellocq's photographs into multiple literary forms to reveal what had not been caught by the camera: letters, diaries, and other linguistic artifacts. By transforming captured, lifeless moments of the women in the poetic narrative through the construction of additional strata for the representations of those prostitutes, the mythical persona, Ophelia, acquires a Stevens-like symbolism in the poem, and

Trethewey as spectator imagines a complicated narrative in epistolary forms. After the first poem, the book is divided into three sections. In the first section of the book, consisting of epistolary poems, Ophelia is an imagined figure derived from Bellocq's photographs, "A very white-skinned black woman" (6). According to the letter, after she left New Orleans, Ophelia could not find work even though she is described as an intelligent woman who knows how to speak and write. By orienting readers to the imagined experience of Ophelia, who is in the midst of people who label her "a *negress*," Trethewey narrates what the photograph could not reveal about its subject: the limited options for this woman in her racialized society (7). In the second section, the brutal description continues throughout multiple letters. In "Countess P—'s Advice for New Girls," women are forced to "Become what [they] must" so that they let the customer in the brothel "see whatever / he needs" (11). It is obvious to readers at this point that the brothel is not what Ophelia wanted when she arrived in New Orleans. But Ophelia does not seem to understand the discrepancy between her expectations and reality. In the next poem, "Letters from Storyville," Ophelia's letter shows that the Countess calls her and the other girls "*Violet*," a common name for prostitutes in Storyville, and the highest bidder does not know her real name (13). In the third stanza, Ophelia reports that she does not attract men, and she is presented as a "newcomer" who is "yet untouched" (13). These multiple layers of the woman's identity—Ophelia, Violet, newcomer—signify how she identifies herself, is identified, and is represented.

Then Trethewey presents ten long poems in chronological order in the last section of the book. The last poem, "Storyville Diary," could be read as a sonnet sequence written in Ophelia's voice. But the poetic forms are very experimental as

sonnets: none of the ten poems have rhymes or meter, and the average length of a line is between eight to thirteen syllables. In closing the volume, Trethewey creates an imaginative conversation with readers about herself and the prostitutes. Mark Strand's observations about poetry are helpful for understanding Trethewey's portrayal of her poems as an imaginative meeting-place for historical memory and erasure:

> A poem is a place where the conditions of beyondness and withinness are made palpable, where to imagine is to feel what it is like to be. It allows us to have the life we are denied because we are too busy living. Even more paradoxically, poetry permits us to live in ourselves as if we were just out of reach of ourselves. (Strand, xxiv)

Strand's "beyondness" and "withinness" apply both to photography and poetry in regard to the oriented imagination. Trethewey's poems, like photographs, fix an image or moment so that readers understand it as truth, just as Ophelia's letters and Bellocq's photography both aim at readers and viewers imagining the multiple layers of women's representation. In this sense, the third sonnet in "Storyville Diary," which is entitled "Bellocq," shows how Ophelia claims the representation of women by hiding the real image from the camera. In the poem, Bellocq appears as a "quiet man," "Papa Bellocq" (39). As the speaker implies, Bellocq let Ophelia strike her own poses for the camera. At the end of the poem, the speaker says:[21]

> I try to pose as I think he would like—shy
> at first, then bolder. I'm not so foolish
> that I don't know this photograph we make

[21] Trethewey does not specify the speaker in the third section. But I am considering her to be Ophelia in this essay.

will bear the stamp of his name, not mine. (39)

Ophelia and Bellocq's relationship is also multi-layered in this poem: artist and subject; man and woman; "Papa" and young child. However, Ophelia specifically claims agency in identifying the photograph as a thing that "we" make (39). Compared to the previous sections in which Ophelia has been an object in photographs, she presents herself as an artist jointly working on a photo with Bellocq. This self-development in understanding her own identities throughout the book orients readers imaginatively to restore those identities. But this proclamation of identity is complicated by the relationship between Ophelia and Bellocq throughout the section. In a poem entitled "Photography," Ophelia recognizes what is visible to Bellocq and his camera:

I look at what he can see through his lens
and what he cannot—silverfish behind
the walls, the yellow tint of a faded bruise—
other things here, what the camera misses. (43)

Ophelia notes that Bellocq's camera does not render everything. Instead, she has a "wider lens" than Bellocq's camera, and the camera, in that sense, does not capture every truth. In Bellocq's photographs, there are many times when women cover their faces with plates. Such hindrances implies that their identities are also purposefully covered, suggesting that there are gaps in what the public knows about the women, their representation, and Bellocq's photographs. In a sonnet entitled "Disclosure," Ophelia asks if there are ways to "obscure a face" (44). Obscuring his image might be a simple visual change for Bellocq, whereas for Ophelia, it is a detachment of her own identity from the social inequality that is tied to the identity of prostitutes. At the end

of the book, Ophelia's detached identities let readers imagine future moments: "Imagine her a moment later, stepping out / of the frame, wide-eyed, into her life" (48). By letting Ophelia move out of the frame of Bellocq's photograph, Trethewey asks readers to imagine the future for her. Trethewey's ambition to "restore or recover" the "subjugated narratives" of Ophelia could only be accomplished through readers' imaginations, historical memory and erasure. In other words, if we return to Trethewey's epigraph at the beginning of the book, "the camera's rendering of reality must always hide more than it discloses" (1). Her poems in *Bellocq's Ophelia* aim to recover the subjugated narratives of the women by orienting readers to the political dimension of imagining the hidden truths that the camera could not capture. Trethewey facilitates historical memory and erasure for this reclamation of the subjugated narratives of many Ophelias. Reading *Bellocq's Ophelia* is, therefore, equivalent to looking at other photographs and visiting Ophelia's life.

From this standpoint, *Bellocq's Ophelia* belongs to a long tradition of Black poetry that appropriates different voices and texts in order to challenge the narrow identification of poetry with subjective lyric expression. One might still ask, though, why this poetic rhetoric of literary photography matters and how Trethewey's imaginative narrative could fully represent the lives of Storyville prostitutes. Ophelia is, of course, a fictional character, and Trethewey also had no information about the prostitutes. To answer, I would refer to Trethewey's comment that she created Ophelia not only to restore the narratives of Storyville prostitutes but also "to investigate aspects" of her own "mixed-race experience" (Rowell 1027). In short, Ophelia was not only created as a symbolic speaker for those Black women who had to live as prostitutes but also was constructed through Trethewey's own biracial "experiences

growing up in the Deep South" (Rowell 1027). By correlatively examining her own personal experiences as a biracial American woman and the lives of Storyville prostitutes, Trethewey's rhetoric facilitates historical memory and erasure in the imagined communities, releasing subjugated narratives both of herself and the prostitutes. For Trethewey, this political role makes poetry necessary. In a 2014 essay, she says:

> Poetry cannot fail, yet the role of poetry waxes and wanes in the lives of many people. We turn to it when we need it. In the face of tragedy, reading poetry may serve as not only our silent reflection, but also our uttered lament, a container for our collective loss. Poetry possesses a cultural force in its ability to give shape to what we have witnessed and therefore inevitably must be articulated … How plainspoken this necessary utterance: The poem's power is also in its sense of justice, its ability to witness without trivializing what happened with a "poetic" ending. It remembers without diminishing. (Trethewey, "Necessary Utterance")

In this sense, the history of Storyville prostitutes and Trethewey's experiences of living in America as a biracial woman from the Deep South constitute a new paradigm that emphasizes the necessary utterance that poetry as a rhetorical act satisfies. It is in this sense that *Bellocq's Ophelia* is a project that seems to extend the rhetoric of the Harlem Renaissance poets by systematically obscuring and abstracting the very texts and voices it contains while underlining the necessity of poetry as an intellectual conversation that establishes and circulates through a public.

As exemplified by *Bellocq's Ophelia*, Trethewey's poetic rhetoric reveals how the political dimension of imagination constitutes a form of public intellectualism and

how poets of this renaissance age have summited Hughes' racial mountain. In this sense, her literary photography wears the mantle of both African-American Modernism and so-called American Modernism. It thus provides the template for a post-soul experience of America by simultaneously reflecting and participating in it; if, overall, it is American experience that is the subject of intellectual conversation, that is because American experience is both its own subject and object, a circle that can never coincide with itself, hence providing the conditions for public circulation. In other words, Trethewey's poetry exemplifies the ways in which the writers of the Black poetry renaissance have moved into the main current of an ongoing literary Modernism.

Chapter 2

Although the Black Poetry Renaissance recuperates the international reputation of Black poetry by extending the rhetoric of the Harlem Renaissance poets, buttressed by my sense that African-American poets traditionally made rhetorical resources and stances fundamental to their work, usually with a visible commitment to revitalize Black culture, it may be time to recognize that such types of poetic rhetoric are prevailing beyond the boundaries of Black culture, American Modernism, and even English poetry in the twenty-first century. My topic in this chapter is to exemplify the globalized poetic rhetoric in the twenty-first century that reveals the public intellectual manner of the contemporary poets around the world stemmed from the American Modernist poetry, by examining how the so-called "documentary poetics" had presence beyond the boundaries of different languages, cultures, and territories. As American poets and critics over the last twenty years have been recovering the significance of documentary poetics in the US poetry, their recent efforts did successfully allow contemporary American documentary poems that incorporate documentary modes of discourse to engage with the social norms to have more presence in literary studies and mainstream culture of the US over the last twenty years—such as Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*, Carolyn D. Wright's *One Big Self*, Juliana Spahr's *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs*, Maggie Nelson's *Jane*, Tyehimba Jess' *Olio*. But this popularity of documentary is not exclusive to the American contexts if we realize that documentary poetic practices are globally more popular than ever: for example, in *Seam*, Tarfia Faizullah recounts the traumatic experiences of women in the 1971 Liberation War as she travels to Bangladesh to interview them; in *from Unincorporated Territory*, the native Chamorro poet Craig

Santos Perez utilizes documentary and other avant-garde modes to protest the impact of colonialism in his homeland, Guam; and the Chilean poet Raúl Zurita engages in documentary poetics to weave political narratives about the traumatic experiences that the Chilean people had to go through during the Pinochet dictatorship.

My argument here is that such documentary poetics have become one of the major forms of global poetic rhetoric in the twenty-first century and that they stemmed from the leftism of the US during the 1930s. This argument that the documentary is one of the major poetic forms of rhetoric around the world has three stakes: (i) it debunks the traditional denunciation of American writers on the documentary mode of discourse in poetry and reveals how powerful that mode is in contemporary poetry; (ii) by illuminating the Modernist impulse in the convergence of the two modes of discourse—documentary and lyric—that are very often deemed incompatible, it suggests a potential expansion of how we demarcate the interdisciplinary influence of American Modernism over the boundaries of different languages and territories in the globalized world; (iii) it suggests that the new millennials consider the aesthetic value of poetry a "relic of a scholarly elite" in the poetry-phobic global communities, and therefore exemplifies the social value of poetry that satisfies the mainstream (Thaler 68). The argument consists of three major parts. First, I will contest the mischaracterization of documentary poetry by reconstructing its definition. By considering Muriel Rukeyser's poetics in *The Book of the Dead* as the foundational work of documentary poetry and its inseparable relationship with the public intellectualism of contemporary poets, I will then examine how documentary poetry was intertwined with politics in the 1930s during the rise of leftism. Afterwards, I will exemplify the global poetic rhetoric stemmed from the

Modernist impulse of her poetics by taking a look into the ways in which Raúl Zurita expands his formal repertoire to position readers in the middle of the personal and the political narratives of the 1970s when violence and atrocities came upon the Chilean people—in which the US was clearly involved in by supporting the coup of 1973. His poem that I discuss in this chapter, *Purgatory*, is the first book of his trilogy—along with *Anteparadise*, and *The New Life*—that expands the poetic materials from literary language to the reproduction of various documents: logos, Christian symbols, and medical reports.[22] Considering that his poetic achievements have been recognized not only in the Latin America regions and Spanish-speaking territories but also North America—he gave several readings and lectures at prestigious universities in the US, during the 1980s and -90s and he was also awarded a scholarship by the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation in 1984, the Pablo Neruda Award in 1989, and the National Prize for Literature of Chile in 2000—I believe his work is remarkable enough to mark the intersection between global poetic rhetoric and American Modernism.

Documentary Poetry and Muriel Rukeyser

As Joseph Harrington states, the term "documentary poetry" indicates a poem that "contains quotations from or reproductions of documents or statements not produced by the poet and relates historical narratives, whether macro or micro, human or natural."[23] If we refer to Jena Osman's 2000 list of documentary poems, the list labels many poems as documentary throughout the last century beginning with Charles Reznikoff's *Testimony*, William Carlos Williams' *Paterson*, Allen Ginsberg's

[22] I refer to the translated titles. The original titles of the trilogy are *Purgatorio, Anteparaiso,* and *La Vida Nueva*.
[23] Harrington, "Docupoetry and archive desire."

Wichita Vortex Sutra and moving through Adrienne Rich's *An Atlas of The Difficult World*.[24] The wide range of writers in Osman's list implies that the concept of documentary poetry has neither a founder nor signature figures so that its practice is not necessarily limited to either Modernist or postmodern moments. Although such efforts of contemporary critics allow us to reconsider the significance of the reproduction of historical documents by the Modernist poets—such as Pound, Rukeyser, and Williams—and make it is easier for audiences in the twenty-first century to see the widespread documentary impulse in US poetry, documentary poetry is still remain relatively understudied as it has been traditionally denounced by many modern writers throughout the twentieth century: for example, poet Nada Gordon claims that documentary poetry is "grasping for mimesis and reportage at the expense of verbal imagination"; Hayden Carruth's commentary rejects the documentary mode of discourse in *Paterson* as "[t]hey are documentary—letters, newspaper clippings, medical records, and the like … But, can a poem survive in the public mind which contains so much unquotable—that is, unrememberable—material?"; and similarly, Randall Jarrell asserts that William Carlos Williams' *Paterson* is treated as "art" merely because it had been copied out on the typewriter.[25] If we trace history of this linear view to the beginning of the twentieth century, Moore's "Poetry" also describes this poetic practice as contrary to poetry in 1919:

> …the immovable critic twitching his skin like a horse that feels a flea, the base ball fan, the statistician –
>
> nor is it valid

[24] The full list is available online: https://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88/docupoems.html.
[25] Gordon, "On Docu-Poetry"; Carruth, 155; Jarrell, 239

> to discriminate against “business documents and
> school-books:” all these phenomena are important. One must take a distinction however: when dragged into prominence by half poets, the result is not poetry, nor till the poets among us can be
> “literalists of
> the imagination”— (27).

Although Moore does consider the reproduction of documents and historical materials important, her distinction of “half poets” from “literalists of the imagination” implies how the reproducing of language was considered contrary to poetry. Not only does this derive from a reductive view on the characteristics of documentary poetry—that a documentary poem includes the reproduction of documents or language not originally produced by the poet—but also it draws on the conception of ars poetica that remains dominant in the US culture. There has been a general trend, from the Romantic era onwards, of understanding poetry as a form of art that depicts individual thoughts and emotions. As Friedrich Schlegel declares in *Athenaeum Fragments* in 1798, the lyric bias of the poetry of Romanticism has been treated as quintessential to the definition of poetry in literary studies:

> Romantic poetry embraces everything that is purely poetic, from the greatest art systems, which contain within them still more systems, all the way down to the sigh, the kiss that a poeticizing child breathes out in an artless song … Other kinds of poetry are finished and can now be fully analyzed. The Romantic form of poetry is still in the process of becoming … The Romantic kind of poetry is the only one which is more than a kind—it is poetry itself. For, in a certain sense, all poetry is or should be Romantic (37).

The problem with this perspective is that it conceptually separates poetry from documenting past experience. Here, I am not trying to controvert that this perspective did not stop any of the Romantic poets from writing about politics or history because documenting the past has been one of the major practices in the long tradition of writing and it traces us even back to pre-Romantic writing, such as Virgil's *Aeneid*. What is important is that this conception of poetry that every poem is or should be Romantic foregrounded the critical tendency of literary critics who prioritize aesthetic craft over other values, which has been exemplified by the debate between Rita Dove and Helen Vendler in the previous chapter and by Moore's distinction of "half poets." Conversely, the twentieth century did see remarkable changes—for instance, Lawrence Ferlinghetti won an obscenity trial held in 1957 with the judge Clayton Horn's decision that Allen Ginsberg's references to drugs and sexual practices in *Howl* had "redeeming social importance."[26] But if we consider how Ginsberg's language was obscene and indecent to the scholars who always sought aesthetic values in parataxis, line-breaks, rhymes, and meter, we can reflect that the denunciation of documentary poetry is based on the same dichotomy of aesthetics versus rhetoric.

Then how can the "documentary" be poetic? As the documentary innately tends "(1) to record, reveal, or preserve, (2) to persuade or promote, (3) to analyze or interrogate, (4) to express," its rhetorical tendency controverts the traditional understanding of poetry in academic discourse, since the Romantic era, that has derived from treating it as aesthetic object that expresses individual thoughts and

[26] For a full discussion of the obscenity trial, look at Ferlinghetti, Lawrence "Horn on *Howl*." *On the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg*. U of Michigan Press, 1984, pp. 42-53.

emotions (Renov, 21). Although the origin of documentary poetic practice is not limited to certain moments, the twentieth century saw the emergence of the documentary genre and its rhetoric motivated by the rise of photo-journalism and leftist politics in the mid-1930s. Monochrome photographs gained cultural prominence in various journalistic spheres: radical organizations such as the Photo League or the Workers Film; the governmental agencies that responded to the Great Depression such as the Farm Security Administration whose photographic file became a popular source for the journalists of the time and drew numerous people to an exhibition in 1938; and the magazines that published photographs to feature the Resettlement Administration which reported the effects of the economic crisis in 1936. The reportage of those magazines was "told in pictures, organized so that the communication of ideas and emotions became most effective" (Stange, 81). This emergence of photo-journalism arose with the development of documentary technologies. As Michael North writes, "many of the radical formal experiments of the twentieth century could be traced back to the new association of word and image suggested by the photograph" (12). As the camera guaranteed the authenticity of the photographs, the authenticity and visual standard challenged writing as documentary technology. For this reason, Modernist poets expanded the formal repertoire of their language and poetic materials. The rhetorical usage of documentary elements in poetic practices was one of those experiments that emerged in the 1930s motivated by leftist politics and photo-journalism. I refer to Muriel Rukeyser's response to the Hawk's Nest tunnel disaster of 1931, *The Book of the Dead*, as an exemplary model of the documentary poem in the 1930s that exemplifies her statement in *U.S. 1*: "poetry can extend the document" (Kaufman, 606). For instance, after the short lyrics in the

first poem, “The Road,” which describes her trip to West Virginia with a photographer to investigate the tragedy, in the third poem, “Statement: Philippa Allen,” Rukeyser reproduces an excerpt of the testimony of a social worker who was assigned to work at the construction of Gauley Bridge. Her voice introduces the Hawks Nest tunnel tragedy, which Rukeyser investigates in the poem:

> During the summer of 1934, when I was doing social work
> down there, I first heard of what we were pleased to call the
> Gauley tunnel tragedy, which involved about 2,000 men. (13)

When she is asked whether she personally met the other workers, she says:

> I have talked to people; yes.
> According to estimates of contractors
> 2,000 men were
>
> > employed there
> > period, about 2 years
> > drilling, 3.75 miles of tunnel
> > To divert water (from New River)
> > To a hydroelectric plant (at Gauley Junction)
>
> The rock through which they were boring was of a high
> silica content (13).

If there were no line-breaks, the poem would be the simple reproduction of the interview Rukeyser had with a social worker. In this stenographic document, Rukeyser investigates the case while readers are invited to witness the captured moment in the document. According to Rukeyser, there is a creative exchange between the readers and the poem when they read the reproduced testimony:

> This is a confession as a means to understanding, as testimony to the truths of experience as they become form and ourselves. The type of this is the poem; in which the poet, intellectually giving form to emotional and imaginative experience, with the music and history of a lifetime behind the work, offers a total response. And the witness receives the work, and offers a total response, in a human communication. Such action … is creation. (212-3)

As a reaction to the radical politics of the 1930s, and central to discussions of the Modernist impulse in poetry that challenges the traditional conception, Rukeyser's investigation suggests a crucial attribute of documents in poetry—not only stenographic testimonies and interviews but also the other documents such as x-ray images that she reproduces throughout the other poems in *The Book of the Dead*—and their ability to demonstrate the imaginative experience to readers along with the poet's intellectual response. This investigation predates the documentary modes of the later poems—such as Williams' *Paterson* and Olson's *The Maximus Poems*—that establish a connection between documentary investigation and political activism. More importantly, it also suggests the Modernist penumbra that produces shifting modes of adaptability, more intellectual conversation within the documentary mode of discourse in poetry, and not necessarily simple reproduction of testimony. Readers have a sense of experiencing what the documentarian experienced, and it "moves" them toward the reported socio-political issues (Rothstein, 34). I am not attempting to claim that Rukeyser's methodology should be considered a direct influence on every later documentary poet; yet, the documentary technologies and investigation in many contemporary pieces have startling parallels with those examples in *The Book of the Dead*.

As exemplified by Rukeyser's use of testimony in *The Book of the Dead*, the documentary cannot be labeled as purely documentary in poetry. Poetry may run through the mind, but reading the context offers another experience to readers. Conversely, the evidentiary mode of documentary poetry has authenticity in replicating experience because the experience is not singularly a matter of external orientation; it is also internal as readers return to the self as they enter into imaginative conversation with the poet. Lurking in the shadows of this contradiction that Rukeyser and other documentarians of the twentieth century had to face, paradoxically, and beyond challenges to aestheticized conceptions of poetry is the dilation of documentary poetic practice into intellectual conversation. As William Stott notes:

> The documentary literature of the thirties was more diverse in medium and far broader in imaginative consequence…a documentary motive was at work throughout the culture of the time: in the rhetoric of the New Deal and the WPA arts projects; in painting, dance, fiction, and theater; in the new media of radio and picture magazines; in popular thought, education and advertising. (4)

This documentary mode of literature lost its luster once again in the 1940s and -50s when academic formalism, accompanied by the decline of radical leftism, dominated poetic practice and literary criticism, and it is therefore surprising to notice that there has been a more widespread documentary impulse in contemporary poetry over the last three decades when America's leading poets became discerning witnesses of the postmodernist transformation of the nation's symbol from the eagle of freedom to the dominant power over the world. The work of these poets in the twenty first century—including Amiri Baraka, Adrienne Rich, Lisa Jarnot, and Juliana Spahr—illustrate the

experience of being American in global history. As this younger generation of poets reinvigorates the tradition of public-oriented poetry with various modes of discourse, we can reflect that the dichotomy of poetry versus the documentary—documents, journalism, politics, history—persists more in traditional conceptions of poetry. Rukeyser's documentary investigation, therefore, suggests that it oscillates between rhetoric and the Modernist impulse to innovate public-oriented poetry. It suggests that the flourishing of contemporary documentary poems indicates that it is not clear to label any poet "experimental" in contemporary academic discourse as the persistence of Rukeyser's legacy in contemporary poetic rhetoric demonstrates that postmodernity contested the dichotomy of rhetoric versus aesthetics in the conception of poetry. Conceptual and emotional connections are left to individualized postmodern readers as this collapse of literary boundaries is the rhetorical promise of non-poetics, including documents.

Raúl Zurita and the Poetry of Crucifixion[27]

In light of all this, we can reflect that the rhetoric of documentary poetry generated one of the major forms of contemporary poetry. Although critics do discuss the documentary works of contemporary American poets who investigate American contexts—such as Rankine, Nowak, and Sand—as the documentary impulse is more widespread in their works compared to those of the mid-twentieth century, there has been little critical attention to poetic rhetoric stemming from Rukeyser's legacy in the era of a globalized economy, politics, and culture. I hope to illuminate a non-American poet's documentary work in order to exemplify global poetic rhetoric in this chapter, Zurita's poems exemplify the widespread transmission of the documentary

[27] Hereafter, every quote from Zurita's texts is translated.

impulse of Rukeyser beyond US territory and mark the potential interdisciplinary expansion of American Modernism beyond the boundaries of English poetry. As American poets registered signs of violent resistance to the nation's international dominance and the subsequent wars, poets around the world took part in public debates concerning the meaning of nation, politics, and public life following the expansion of free markets and communication technologies in postmodern communities. Although a handful of translators and critics labels Zurita's work postmodern, my argument is that his account of the Pinochet dictatorship in his poems therefore reverses the mischaracterization of documentary poetry by merging lyrics and documents into an imaginable narrative.

It is time for Zurita's poetry to come into focus. We can start at an apparent tangent: with the traumatic experience that he contextualizes in his poems. When President Salvador Allende was murdered and general Augusto Pinochet established a dictatorship in Chile on September 11, 1973, Zurita was a college student of engineering in Valparaíso. As Chile, the oldest republic in Latin America—La República de Chile—had to go through socio-political struggles in the aftermath of that 1973 coup d'état. Zurita was also arrested, detained, and tortured with thousands of other Chilean people. This horrifying experience profoundly traumatized him and it influenced his identity as a radical poet who decided to stay in Chile while so many other people, according to William Rowe's translation of Zurita's book, *INRI*, "disappeared" and the authorities kept what had happened to them confidential—the former president Ricardo Lagos' national speech on January 8, 2001 corroborates that those disappeared people were either kidnapped or tortured and their bodies were thrown "into the ocean, the lakes, and the rivers of Chile." Poetry was rhetoric for

Zurita in those moments when he stayed in that traumatic place when he had a choice to leave, as he notes in the preface to *Purgatory*: "I had to learn how to speak again from total wreckage, almost from madness, so that I could still say something to someone." He articulates that attempting to speak shaped his work to be more experimental as none of the traditional poetic forms he knew could accurately convey the "wreckage":

> It's difficult for me to comment on my own work, but I feel that *Purgatory* represents a certain image of what pain can generate, of its desperation, but also, I hope, of its beauty. It seemed to me then that the great imprints of human passion, of our suffering as well as a strange perpetuity and survival, are reflected in the landscape. None of the poetic forms I knew, nothing, could help me express this. From there, I think, emerged the need to use other registers, such as mathematics…or visual forms or documents. (*Purgatory*, xii)

While *Purgatory* consists of lyrics spoken by multiple voices that orients readers to re-imagine the political struggle of the disappeared, those lyric voices are interrupted by the three documents that report Zurita's burning of his own cheek. On the one hand, Zurita disintegrates his voice into multiple voices regardless of time and space. For example, one of the disintegrated voices of "I" in the poem entitled "LXIII" conveys the pathetic and humble dream of a cow:

> Today I dreamed that I was King
> they were dressing me in black-and-white spotted pelts
> Today I moo with my head about to fall
> as the church bells' mournful clanging
> says that milk goes to market. (21)

He conflates the sacrificial figure of a “King” whose head “falls” like Christ and a cow lamenting the sale of her milk. The “I” coalesces the impossible dream of being a king, the oppression of the cow, and the two identities while the church bells mark the time of buying and selling of goods. Throughout the poem, Zurita fuses multiple pronouns that constitute his own voice for narrating the individual memory. To understand this articulation of personal memory with the fusion of pronouns as Zurita’s public-intellectual manner, I refer to Paul Ricoeur’s discourse in “Personal Memory, Collective Memory”:

> Why should memory be attributed only to me, to you, to her or to him, in the singular of the three grammatical persons capable of referring to themselves, of addressing another as you (in the singular), or of recounting the deed of the third party in a narrative in the third person singular? And why could the attribution not be made directly to us, to you in the plural, to them?

As Ricoeur suggests, the grammatical problem is inevitably related to the idea of subjectivity, consciousness, and the identity of the self. By disintegrating his voice into multiple voices that delineate subjective memory, Zurita aims at projecting intersubjectivity in his lyrics that transforms the personal memory into the collective history that multiple readers witness. In this way, he invites readers to re-imagine the wreckage of the disappeared that has been physically diminished. Here, to exemplify this relationship between Zurita’s disintegration of voices and the intellectual manner more clearly, I refer to his lyrics that document the image of the landscape in the vast Atacama Desert:

> Over the cliffs of the hillside: the sun
>
> then below in the valley

the earth covered with flowers

Zurita enamored friend

takes in the sun of photosynthesis

Zurita will now never again be friend

since 7 P.M. it's been getting dark

Night is the insane asylum of the plants (19).

For Zurita, the beautiful image turns into the traumatic landscape in which "night is the insane asylum of the plants." When his lyrics seek to find an image of what was not seen and not said about those disappeared Chilean people, the imagining of it involves the whole landscape of Chile. For readers, the disappeared are re-imagined through such images. For this reason, he places multiple voices throughout the poem; for example, another voice speaks to readers directly in the later lyrics:

Look at that: the Desert of

Atacama it's nothing but stains

did you know? Of course but how

hard would it have been to

take a look at yourself and say:

Christ come on I too am full of

stains —listen pretty boy have you

. seen your own sins? (31)

For readers who are not aware of the Chilean history, the disjunctive question reveals that Zurita's contexts are clearly not Romantic. However, if we return to the idea that poetry was rhetoric for Zurita, we can reflect that the question is against the brutality of politics that he had to endure. This conjunction of memory, image, and the public-

oriented reflex enables us to position Zurita as a rhetor. He speaks more directly about this rhetoric that incorporates imagination in poetry—which critics label as so-called postmodernist—he articulates more clearly in the interview about his recent book, *The Country of Planks*:

> In the background to these poems there is a series of paintings by Bacon called "The Crucifixion," and in these paintings you never see the cross, but only the figures that surround it, enraged figures, a rage as if they had been pierced by an uncontainable fury, a desperation. I think these poems, then, are like a crucifixion, where the cross is never shown. Instead you see the crowds that surround the cross; finally, what is being shown is a Christ who is never present; the only thing reflected, finally, is the pain and the violence human beings inflict on other human beings (Borzutzky, "Today").

Overall, at the most general level, if we contextualize this with Zurita's traumatic experience, *Purgatory* crucifies the disappeared, including himself. In other words, Zurita's poem aligns poetry with the aesthetics of painting as he suggests in his reference to Bacon's work, and it therefore orients readers to the position of imagining the landscape and the other surroundings that reflect the pain and the violence inflicted on the Chilean people. In this sense, radical poetic forms throughout the lyrics transform visual materials into rhetoric. For example, the poem entitled "Pampas," which is obviously named after the fertile South American lowlands that he travels, consists of three monostiches: "Areas of Delirium (I) / Areas of Passion (II) / Areas of Death (III)" (79). These three stanzas segment the fertile landscape of the Pampas that reflects delirium, passion, and death. Similarly, multiple poems in the fifth section entitled "MY LOVE OF GOD" fully consist of non-Euclidean geometric

figures: “The Plains of Pain” consists of shapes of the segmented plains—five big “L” shapes—accompanied by a single line “and pain”; and “My Love Of God” has 21 Ichthys symbols shaping an inverted pyramid (85; 87). Hence, by lyrically and visually documenting the landscape that reflects the violence inflicted on the Chilean people, Zurita’s poems orient individual readers to the crowds: while they can never actually see the real crucifixion of the disappeared, they are guided to imagine the rage and pain of the Chilean people reflected in the landscape documented by his fierce voice disintegrated into multiple voices and poetic forms.

In this sense, on the other hand, Zurita’s documentary repertoire—photocopies of handwritten poems that are placed before the lyrics; the psychologist’s handwritten letter included before the poems that he wrote while reflecting on the desert and the green areas; and the three pages of electroencephalogram that close the poem—that he juxtaposes between the sections reveals how such documents turns the personal memory into the collective memory. For Zurita, the trauma that identified him as a poet of the disappeared as well as poetic forms and multiple voices aim at achieving intersubjectivity and empathy. As he mentions in the preface, “I recalled the well-known evangelical phrase: If someone strikes your right cheek, turn the other to him,” he burns his left cheek as a sign of political resistance. He documents this resistance in *Purgatory* by including photocopies of the handwritten poems. The book begins with these lines: “my friends think / I’m a sick woman / because I burned my cheek” (3). A few pages later, Anna Deeny translates the photocopy of the handwritten poem, which is placed next to the photo of Zurita under the phrase “I am who I am” in Latin:

my name is Rachel

I've been in the same

business for many

years. I'm in the

middle of my life.

I lost my way.— (11)

As experience, etymologically derived from the Latin word *experior*, means to encounter and endure certain situations, the documentary mode of Zurita's poetic repertoire aims at making more witnesses to what made Raúl became Rachel. That is, the disintegration of the "I" into Zurita's later voices drives the pursuit of intersubjectivity and empathy in the imaginative conversation with readers while placing himself in the middle of the personal and the political. In other words, showing his own documents and the other literary landscapes of Latin America, therefore, is not a simple combination of epic and lyric voices but conveys Zurita's intellectual manner that integrates the multiple poetic forms and voices into a conversation with readers. Although Zurita never specifies whether he actually had the "epileptic psychosis," Zurita's aim in the documents is to generate a combination of poetic forms and voices that seek intellectual conversation with readers through the wreckage (57). Thus, we can suggest that the three statements on the EEG at the end of the poem implies his attitude towards the Dantesque world that he crucifies: "my cheek is the shattered sky / my cheek is the shattered sky and the brothels of Chile / of the love that moves the sun and other stars" (90-6). Here, considering these monostiches are written on each EEG and each stanza has a title—"INFERNO," "PURGATORY," and "PARADISE"—we can reflect that Zurita emphasizes "the love" that signifies the unity between people that alters the "shattered sky" which

implies not only political resistance as a poet of the disappeared but also the landscape that reflects the violence inflicted on a man by another man. The images of the EEG, a technological device used to trace the complex processes of human minds, hence are juxtaposed against the landscape—the shattered sky—and the external mark of effacement—the burnt cheek—in this imaginative conversation. Thus, the images of the EEG and the monostiches on them signify Zurita's question to readers: What forms can express the landscape of the mind of who we are and the violence that human beings inflicted on others?

Because such multiple forms and voices coalesce in the landscape that they reflect on, a handful of critics denounce the progression of verses throughout this documentary poem for either not being completely grammatical and intelligible or for being a religious redemption in poetic form. The problem with such denunciations is that those critics mischaracterize *Purgatory* as a failed poetic text—if we consider that Zurita's two other works in the trilogy, *Anteparadise* and *The New Life*, he clearly demonstrates mastery of a more complete fusion of multiple voices that speak, not as a collage, but as one, and thus accomplishes a transformation of the vast range of documents into public-oriented discourse. It is a vision of manifold forms that cooperate with one another to create a cohesive, imaginative, and intellectual conversation beyond suffering and the formal segregation reflected in the landscapes and in political resistance. Affiliations that determine how humans delineate difference and division through nation, body, gender, geography through the alive and the dead, are distinctive more than ever in the postmodern world. The communion of forms and voices reflecting on the pain in *Purgatory*, therefore, foreshadows Zurita's pursuit of unity beyond those boundaries. That is, Zurita reminds us that unbinding

poetic elements from grammar, syntax, and the other traditional literary agreements among scholars and critics shifts the ideal of poetry from the aesthetic object to a mnemonic device that alter the terms of history. Critics tend to compare Zurita's radical achievements to those of his predecessors—such as Pablo Neruda and Nicanor Parra—but there is relatively less critical attention to contemporary poetry with Latin American socio-political contexts in relation to the US over the twentieth century. As Deeny notes in the afterword in *Purgatory*:

> In 2007 Ediciones Universidad Diego Portales released a new edition of *Purgatory*. Read now, nineteen years after redemocratization, the new edition reiterates the initial horror and protest of the forces that instigated the coup. Even throughout Chile's transition to democracy, its government and the US government are hesitant to acknowledge the extent of the regime's brutality and the United States' direct monetary, military, and ideological involvement (114).

In other words, Zurita's achievement in *Purgatory* does not only reenacts Rukeyser's investigative practice as a rhetor that intertwined the documentary and the political activism but also suggests the social, political, and cultural connection between Latin America and the United States in a public intellectual manner. That exemplifies the significance of *Purgatory*, of the wreckage that occurs, of where Zurita has been but of what he cannot yet, nonetheless, attempt to speak.

Codetta

Near the beginning of the US presidential election of the 2020, in September 29, American actor John Lithgow officially published the collection of his poems, *Trumpty Dumpty Wanted a Crown*, and recruited his colleagues—Meryl Streep, Samuel L. Jackson, Whoopi Goldberg, Glenn Close, Steve Buscemi, and Joseph Gordon-Levitt—to read his poems aloud. Although Lithgow knew that his poems would not defeat Donald Trump, regardless of how they were composed, through reading his poem, he delivered humor, schadenfreude, and reassurance to voters who were disputing as the November 3 election drew near: "Trumpty Dumpty wanted a crown / To make certain he never would have to step down."[28] Indeed, Lithgow's vision might seem jeering in its singular focus on the US politics and its lack of acknowledgment of other views.

Many in the audience who tuned in on the Internet to listen to Lithgow and his colleagues reading the poems, no doubt found his political verses humorous and moving on account of their anti-Trump sentiment. As the editor of those clips added visual aids to assist Lithgow's political humor, the poem perfectly exemplified the idea of what poetry is or should be in contemporary moments, speaking to the voters intimately and circulating their discourse to connect them in the same community.[29] But many also found the poem to be aesthetically mediocre, filled with banal rhymes and the overly-biased political imagery. In the following weeks, the poem became widely circulated in the media, while poets and critics did not seem to pay enough

[28] Every reading is available at: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC5oFx087j4_KrdfQPrVexxA.
[29] As a result, the book has been many times marked as the bestseller online over October and November, and it is still, according to Amazon in December 7, 2020, marking itself as the best seller in political humor.

critical attention to the new publication.

If we consider the political context of Lithgow's verses, any debate among the readers on the Internet concerning their aesthetic values or subject matter is beside the point. It is clear that the overall impact of Lithgow's verses was less related to his poetic talent than his personal background as a widely-known actor who satirizes the Trump administration. The descriptive simplicity, affirmative tone, and exceptional rhetoric that Lithgow's verses exemplify are intertwined as the features of contemporary epideictic verses especially when they are part of what is supposed to be either formal or rhetorical. The function of such poetries is to speak about social norms in a critical vocabulary. I suggest that we must acknowledge the difficulty of having to come up with a poem that would need to be appealing to millions of people who do not normally read poems and it should not be overlooked that the initial popularity of Lithgow's political verses implies that they do convey compositional power. Their merits and shortcomings aside, *Trumpty Dumpty Wanted a Crown* demonstrates how difficult it is to tailor aesthetic values of a poem to contemporary audience's expectations, especially when the majority of a poet's audience happens to read remarkably less compared to the previous generations.

This thesis has examined two contemporary poems written in a public intellectual manner that are also addressed to a large audience. They are not necessarily aiming at satirizing the president or a specific political party but composed specifically for public occasions, although they certainly respond to either an important social agenda or political events. As witnesses, judges, literary adventurers who seek moral community, and a citizen in this age of language-centered poetics, the works of Trethewey and Zurita exemplify how contemporary poets have reclaimed

poetry's place in the sphere of the public intellectuals. The contemporary relevancy of poetry to cultural discourse, thus, even if that relevance is not directed by a large readership, is not solely determined by aesthetic values that have traditionally governed its essential quality. In addition, the essential quality of poetry has been what we call literary merit. While responding to the obscenity trial for Allen Ginsberg's poem "Howl," Walter Van Tilburg Clark writes:

> I think the test of literary merit must be, to my mind, first, the sincerity of the writer. I would be willing, I think, even to add the seriousness of purpose of the writer, if we do not by that leave out the fact that a writer can have a fundamental serious purpose and make a humorous approach to it. I would add also there are certain specific ways in which craftsmanship at least of a piece of work, if not in any sense the art, which to my mind involves more, may be tested. (Morgan and Peters, 155-6)

As the aesthetic values of poetry have diversified since the World War II, what have been excluded from the definition of literary aesthetic, such as roles and purposes of writers, are now new criteria to assess poetic value and literary merit of a text. In this sense, what poets over the world achieved in the last few decades have successfully demonstrated the mass collectivity of contemporary poetry and its expansive inquiry. I believe such achievements indicate that poets in this age have to face an inevitable challenge: to mediate between the dichotomy of aesthetic craftmanship that literary critics praise versus the empathy formed by a large readership of poetry-phobic audience.

Poetry is the art of imagination. Poets typically ask audiences to identify with the pathos that they demonstrate through their expressive activities. When they

become rhetors, they invite us to those activities. Postmodernist poetry is not an exception from this practice. Given the restorative role of imagination that allows us to redeem the referentiality of language in a language-centered world, postmodernist poetry affords the possibility of being more intricate and intense for readers to understand the world beyond the text. Literary studies are education into that demonstration and they enrich our possibilities for imagination and thus for sorting what matters to us in the relevant circumstances. I think that reclamation of the referentiality of language and the determinacy of the poet in the twenty-first century exemplify the socio-political values of literature to which the new millennium and many contemporary critics are insensible.

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